

# Orthodox Jewish women's prayer groups

## Seeking a more meaningful religious experience

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This article provides a sociological analysis of the rising phenomenon of women's prayer groups within an Orthodox framework and explores the genesis of the movement and the motivation cited by its key proponents.

Prayer is a central feature of religion. In Orthodox Judaism prayer requirements are different for men and women. Whereas males are required to pray three times a day, preferably in a quorum of ten men, women are only obligated to pray at least once a day privately and not necessarily within the synagogue.<sup>1</sup> Although women may attend synagogue services, they can not actively participate or lead any portion of the service. From early childhood boys and girls are socialised to accept this as normative. In Reform and Conservative denominations, services are more egalitarian – women are granted full participation and leadership roles and men and women sit in mixed pews, although traditional attitudes towards women are still prevalent.

It is widely held that women's prayer groups began in the United States with a Simhat Torah celebration at Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City in 1972. Since then over 50 groups have been formed. Most are in the United States, but groups also exist in Israel, Canada, England and Australia. In the last year alone, there has been a 40 per cent increase in the number of groups. Twenty of the groups are in the New York metropolitan area.<sup>2</sup> Individual *tefillah* groups are loosely organised into the Women's Tefillah Network, an

informal 'umbrella' organisation that provides information and a forum for discussion. The groups are cognisant of the *teshuva* of Rav Moshe Feinstein and follow other Orthodox rabbis who specify the halakhic parameters under which they may operate.<sup>3</sup> The women lead services and read from the Torah scrolls. Most groups meet one Shabbat morning a month (usually *m'varhim halohodesh*), and many also have services for the holidays of Purim, Simhat Torah and Tisha B'Av.

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Controversy surrounds the issue of organised women's *tefillah* groups, as they are opposed by some, reluctantly tolerated by others, and actively supported by few. Until now there has been no systematic investigation of the women involved and their feelings and motives.

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It should be noted that the notion of women praying together has biblical roots in the events at Yam Suf when Miriam gathered the women to sing and dance.<sup>4</sup> In addition, girls and teenagers in yeshiva day schools and summer camps pray together daily as a group. Hence, the existence of women's prayer groups should not necessarily seem unusual in Orthodoxy.

Nonetheless, the emergence of organised women's *tefillah* has met with unusual opposition and this study was undertaken to better understand Orthodox women's prayer groups. Why do some Orthodox Jewish women

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feel the need to have separate prayer services? What benefit do they receive in remaining loyal to Orthodox tradition in the face of continued opposition from much of the Orthodox rabbinical establishment?

In an effort to answer the questions posed, an exploratory study using a qualitative method that consisted of in-depth interviews with 27 women participants in prayer groups was conducted. Open ended interview questions were designed in order to understand why the women joined prayer groups. The 'convenience' sample was drawn by contacting the co-ordinators of women's *tefillah* groups in the New York metropolitan area. Those contacted referred the researcher to potential participants. In this way a sample consisting of women of various ages and marital status, group founders, and leaders as well as passive participants, was selected.

A demographic profile of the 27 respondents revealed women ranging in age from 25 to 63 with a mean age of 48. The majority, 81 per cent, was married, four were single, and one was widowed. The number of years married basically reflected the ages of the women, i.e., the older the woman, the longer she had been married. Together the women had a total of 54 children. Thus, on average, the women had two or three children, and the range was from one to five children.

As a group, the women were well educated; 70 per cent had master's degrees, 22 per cent were either working on or had completed doctoral degrees and two had bachelor's degrees. In

addition, 74 per cent were working outside the home.

The majority, 70 per cent, came from Orthodox homes, while the remainder were *ba'alot teshuva*. Fifty-five per cent had at least yeshiva high school education or more, 22 per cent had Talmud Torah education, and another 22 per cent learned about Judaism from classes attended when they were college age or older.

Although 70 per cent used the terms modern or centrist Orthodox to characterise their religiosity, all the women were essentially modern Orthodox regardless of the adjectives they used to describe themselves. By and large, when asked about their religious ideology, all espoused a belief in *Torah u'Madda*, Zionism and concern for all Jews regardless of affiliation. According to many, these are central attributes of modern Orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup>

When asked why they wanted to participate in separate prayer groups, a surprising pattern emerged among most of the interviewees. Recurring themes were a spiritual search for meaningful, quiet and serious prayer; a feeling of community; a connection to God; and a desire to celebrate rites of passage.

### Search for a spiritually meaningful prayer experience

The most frequent response was to seek a meaningful religious experience and participate actively in services.

## Participating with women in an innovative approach to religious expression and together establishing a fresh approach to communal responsibilities were often mentioned

More than three-quarters of the respondents felt left out in regular congregational Shabbat services and especially on Simhat Torah. They lamented their distance from the *bimah*, *hazzan* and especially the Torah, which made them feel that I may as well not be there. The women indicated a desire for an intense, spiritually gratifying religious experience they believed could best be achieved by-

women leading prayer services, women praying together and reading from the Torah.

Women indicated that they needed 'a place to connect spiritually' or to 'get in touch with spirituality', 'a place where everyone was totally focused on praying'. One said, 'I was looking for a focused religiously meaningful experience with women'. Other comments included, 'you could feel the atmosphere, you felt close to God... in contrast you sit in shul and you're bored to tears.' And, 'You get the feeling people are doing this out of true love for their religion ... it's really inspiring'.

A dominant theme was the description of women's prayer as quiet, purposeful and spiritual. The women felt that there was utter seriousness among the participants. There were no distractions, no talking and no interest in other people's clothing. The focus was completely on prayer. In contrast, women often felt that their own synagogues were noisy and Shabbat services seemed more like social events.

### Feeling of community

Participating with women in an innovative approach to religious expression and together establishing a fresh approach to communal responsibilities were often mentioned. The following quotes elucidate this theme: 'the group is a unique way of connecting, and provides a sense of warmth and support'. Or, 'There's also a sense of everybody being together. In a small group there's a sense of intimacy, sense of connection, seriousness, everyone really wants to be there.' Another said, 'the group is like a community'. Or, 'Praying together with women is more meaningful than other communal activities women do together'. Another said, 'These are fine people. I've been through a whole life cycle with them.'

One reason why participatory group prayer was so important was their positive and meaningful childhood and teenage prayer experiences in school and shul, which many remembered nostalgically. Perhaps they were trying to recapture these earlier experiences in the women's *tefillah*.

Although prayer with women in a group was important, the women still regarded daily private prayer and Shabbat services in regular synagogue as important as well.

Seventeen of the 27 stated they prayed daily or several times a week. A few prayed more than once

a day. Attending women's prayer groups reinforced the desire to pray daily and on Shabbat.

Seventy per cent of the women pray every Shabbat, whether in shul or at home. Despite their dissatisfaction with traditional shul davening and, for some, the obligations of child care, 19 – a strong majority – pray when there is no women's prayer group. This suggests an unwavering commitment to prayer. However, many feel that prayer in the women's prayer group is what they look forward to. Most importantly, praying in a woman's group provides an opportunity for active participation by leading the prayers or reading from or being called to the Torah. The opportunity for active participation reduced their grievances regarding their 'passive' shul role, and strengthened their ties to the community at large.

### Connection to God

A connection to God was sought not only through prayer but also through the medium of the Torah. Proximity to and reading from the Torah scroll was a very important theme. As one said, 'I am in awe each time I approach the Torah'. Another said, 'It's not the davening, it's the Torah, it's looking into it and "leining", looking at the words, it's the basis of how we live our life, our link to God.' A typical comment of a woman who read from the Torah was, 'the most spiritual aspect was reading from the Torah, seeing the words makes it come to life'.

Because they desired connection, the feeling of exclusion from an active role in the synagogue was voiced by 75 per cent of the women. A woman said the following about Simhat Torah:

for me it came out of feeling disenfranchised, especially I teach Torah all week, but when it comes time to celebrate it, it was a very disconnecting feeling.

Another said, 'when the rabbi said everyone will get a *hakafah*, he wasn't talking about me'. Because they desired to hold the Torah, read from the Torah or be called to the Torah and could not do this during regular synagogue services, they

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strongly felt the need for separate women's services.

The halakhic requirement to separate men and women heightened the sense of exclusion and disconnectedness. The balcony or the rear of the shul was experienced as too far away and the *mehitsah* blocked the view. Women verbalised frustration at not being able to see or hear what was happening in shul. Said one, 'Lots of men do not know what it's like behind the *mehitsah*, often I

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can not hear or see what is going on'. Another said, 'what I don't like in shul is if I can't see anything, if I can't see, hear,

or touch, it's hard for me to connect.' 'I was always bothered by the *mehitsah*, not because I felt second class but I couldn't see – I wondered what are they doing?'

#### **Express rites of passage**

Of particular interest, the respondents expressed the important role the prayer group has in articulating rites of passage. For example, in the women's prayer groups a *bat mitzvah* and a bride can be called to the Torah, can read from the Torah and can give a *d'var torah*. Celebrating these life cycle events within the group heightened the feeling of belonging to the group, secured a link to the past and reinforced the concept of community. Mothers of daughters particularly felt that the enhanced religious experience in the prayer groups would help their daughters maintain a strong Orthodox connection.

Since the *kaddish* can not be said at women's prayer groups, some women give *divrei torah* on the anniversary of a parent's death. Giving a *d'var torah* to mark a parent's death was seen as a partial solution and represented an attempt to attain a religious link to the past.

#### **Secular education, work, religious education and classes**

As educated women, this group felt frustrated that their success and achievements could not be replicated in religious spheres. They were troubled by their passive role in the synagogue, representing a radical discontinuity between their public and private roles.

Although their levels of secular education were high and most were involved in the labour force, it was noteworthy that 70 per cent were involved in ongoing religious studies formally or in local *shiurim*. Many of the women had been involved in Torah study before they attended the prayer groups, but there was no pattern as to whether they first joined the study group or prayer group. What is evident is that Torah study and prayer reinforced each other.

Knowledgeable about the halakhic guidelines for the prayer groups, the respondents firmly held that opposition to prayer groups was sociological rather than halakhic. Because of their knowledge, the women were aware that innovations are often suspect, and likened this contemporary controversy with the rabbinic opposition faced by Sarah Schenirer when she pioneered formal religious education for women in 1917.<sup>6</sup>

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As a rule, the women did not understand why others called them 'feminist', nor did they believe that their desire to participate in prayer groups was influenced by feminism. As one articulate woman said, 'this is not about feminism. This is about participation and achieving meaningful prayer.' Another said, 'It's not about women, it's about connection'. Another said, 'I see myself as Orthodox and feminist, someone who adopts feminism as long as it doesn't conflict with *halakha*'. The clearest expression of the women's feelings is expressed in the following: 'I hate that word – feminism – it carries associations that don't apply to me. Most of us don't come out of the secular feminist movement.' Most said that they are feminist only to the extent that they espouse equality for women in the labour force.

The women maintained that the current halakhic parameters set forth by their rabbinic authorities are satisfactory, though some want their

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rabbinic supporters to be more forthcoming. In the final analysis, however, they are willing to work within Orthodoxy. They want to maintain the integrity of the halakhic system but desire an open and serious discussion of halakhic avenues wherein they would be allowed more active participation in prayer services and in organised Jewish life. The following sums up the feelings of most: 'As long as there is an outlet for women, I want to leave *halakha* as is except where it can be pushed'.

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Although conflicted, a minority of six of the 27 women ever considered leaving Orthodoxy. Three recurring reasons for remaining Orthodox voiced were the link to the past and through it to the present and the future; that Orthodoxy represents the only historically authentic and consistent tradition; and that Orthodoxy is the only Jewish denomination able to transmit tradition to the next generation. To remain Orthodox means to fulfil their role as transmitters of tradition. Typical of the feelings of the women was the following comment from one woman who tried egalitarian services. She said, 'leaving Orthodoxy would give me less than I have now. Orthodoxy offers total devotion. In the other movements even if women have more, but everyone has less.'

These women have certain characteristics which make them willing to be on the cutting edge of innovative practices. They desire women's *tefillah* and try to ignore the controversy surrounding their involvement. Although some women have left women's *tefillah* because it did

not go far enough or went too far, those currently involved have a strong commitment to Orthodox Judaism and *halakha* and have rejected egalitarian services.

This study was undertaken to try to understand the motivation, beliefs and behaviour of participants in *tefillah* groups. By focusing on the women's own words, it has been shown that women who attend prayer groups do so out of a sincere desire for meaningful prayer and active participation in *tefillah* activities. Their sincerity is irrefutable and, by their own words, their commitment to Orthodoxy and the halakhic process immutable. Faced with the option of attending egalitarian services and leaving Orthodoxy, they choose to stay despite the slings and arrows hurled at them by those who disapprove of their behaviour. Their behaviour should be understood and active dialogue between participants and the clergy should be encouraged.

#### Notes

- 1 See the discussion in Avraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer* (New Jersey: Ktav 1990) pp.13–31.
- 2 Women's Tefillah Network Newsletter (November 1997) p.3.
- 3 Weiss (note 1) see discussion and footnotes on pp.107–10 concerning Rav Moshe Feinstein's letter of 4 Sivan 5743 and Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik's comments.
- 4 Exodus 15:20–21. See Rashi's commentary on '*vataan lahem Miriam*'.
- 5 Central features of modern Orthodoxy are mentioned in the following articles: Shmuel Singer, 'Modern Orthodoxy: Crisis and Solution', *Tradition* (Summer 1988) pp.47–53; Walter S. Würzburger, 'Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as Posek of Post-Modern Orthodoxy', *Tradition* (Fall 1994) pp.5–20.
- 6 Deborah Weissman, 'Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists', in Elizabeth Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Home* (New York: Schocken Books 1976) pp.139–48.